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Creating synergies: Local government facilitating learning and development through partnerships

Peter Waterhouse
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Workplace Learning Initiatives Pty Ltd

A National Vocational Education and Training **Research** and **Evaluation** Program **Report**

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Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Creating synergies: Local government facilitating learning and development through partnerships—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

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Key messages

This report documents the evolution and development of four 'learning communities' in Victoria where local government has been involved. It investigates the challenges and complexities faced in getting these communities off the ground and the role that the vocational education and training (VET) sector has played. The study has highlighted the importance of recognising different stakeholders' values and perspectives, appreciating multiple outcomes, and proactively managing the relationships between various groups of stakeholders.

- Local government has enormous potential and invaluable resources that enable vocational education and training to support local socioeconomic development. Local government is strategically placed to identify local needs and to facilitate networks, connections and directions for development.
- Management styles in social partnership projects should, ideally, be those with the capacity to work with higher levels of unpredictability and ambiguity. They should also display responsiveness, creativity and flexibility. In addition, managers need to be flexible in applying policy and funding to accommodate shifting needs and opportunities.
- Managers of stakeholder groups also need skills in managing the relationships between different partnership organisations, while respect for different values, needs and modes of operation is also necessary. The partnership participants need to value the health of the combined project over their particular institutional or personal interest.
- Passionate individuals are required for partnership projects to flourish; their commitment is the engine which drives the processes.
- None of the partnership projects in this study has been initiated or led by VET institutions. However, the VET system has been a useful tool in assisting more proactive partners to achieve their goals through effective educational strategies and curriculum/learning design. On occasions private providers have been especially established to overcome the hurdles encountered in mainstream VET institutions and systems.

Executive summary

This research sought to investigate and document four evolving learning communities in Victoria where local government is playing a key role. The project is based upon an earlier study conducted by the Victorian Local Governance Association (Snelling 2003). The main report provides an overview of the research and the findings, while the support document provides the literature review and four case studies and can be found at the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

The four learning communities each involved a range of industry, community, education and local government stakeholders. The case studies from these sites reveal the complexities facing practitioners interested in developing the cooperative partnerships required for the creation of such learning communities. The importance of recognising the different values and perspectives of the various stakeholders, appreciating the value of multiple outcomes, and actively managing the relationship between the stakeholders emerge as key principles.

We conclude that, in many respects, new hybrid forms of professional practice are required. By this we mean modes of work that combine disciplines, areas of practice and ways of working. For instance, in the Melton case study we see cross-sectoral work that encompasses elements of town planning and industry development in combination with elements of curriculum and instructional design and outreach work with youth. In the 'Governance Plus' story, professional practice in commercial management and business development is coupled with educational design and proactive social work. These new forms of work move beyond the traditional practice and work modes (and conventional position descriptions) of many, perhaps all, of those involved.

This study highlights that local government can play a key role in education, particularly in relation to lifelong learning.

The analysis of these sites identified a range of key success factors, as well as factors inhibiting the development of these learning communities.

Key success factors in learning communities

Effective orientation to policy and funding

When new policy directions and funding opportunities ignite interest in the community and industry, partnerships can emerge to create development opportunities. For these opportunities to be realised, they must first of all be aligned to federal, state and local government policy to ensure financial support for the proposed project.

Passion and vision with strategic planning

A key factor in these sites was the way local government enacted its governance and community responsibilities. This included the provision of forums for intersectoral exchange, which also enabled industry and community to express needs and identify opportunities.

The approach to partnership development requires vision and strategy. Program planning, which enables a cluster of interrelated projects to be strategically aligned to realise an expansive vision

beyond the immediate needs, is important. The strategic approach also involves the identification or shaping of projects that intersect with high-priority needs for all partners, as well as deliberate strategies to shift projects from pilot status to the mainstream ('institutionalisation').

Of equal importance however is the passion and commitment of key people who become the 'drivers' for these projects. The involvement of enthusiastic educators who understand the (specific) industry and the principles of contextualised, interactive education is essential, as are project champions at each stakeholder level who have vision and leadership skills.

Stewardship

Stewardship emerged as a key success factor. Fostering stewardship requires management which promotes group identity over individual identity and group ownership over individual ownership. Managers need to manage for the wellbeing of the whole project rather than the specialist interests of a particular stakeholder. Here local government has the potential to play a key stewardship role. At its best, stewardship promotes high levels of industry engagement and ownership, including engagement in the training/learning designs, resourcing and implementation. Broad community ownership helps to ensure sustainability.

Managing across sectors and working with different values

Managing the cross-sectoral relationships within the social partnerships emerged as a critical success factor. The awareness and willingness of all parties to recognise, appreciate and make allowances for the processes and cultural differences of other partners was important. At times, to maintain effective collaboration, there was a need for active mediation and bridge-building, for nurturing relationships between all stakeholders and for engendering trust and cultural understanding. The effective management of cross-sectoral interests also entailed the delegation of operational matters to professional bodies and encouraged the building of new business relationships and partnerships.

Enabling management for 'fuzzy' projects

'Fuzzy' projects are those where the anticipated path, timelines, resourcing and outcomes are unpredictable—as is often the case in pilot projects. They are characterised by uncertainty, complexity, diverse values, ambiguity and risk. Such projects require particular management skills and flexible structures. Enabling ('making things happen') management emerged as a key success factor for such projects, while inflexible management was identified as a significant inhibitor. In projects such as these, managers need to be advocates, sometimes willing and able to 'bend the rules'. They need to appreciate the creative energy of passionate activists within the project and be willing to adapt and incorporate new ideas and facilitate new approaches. Flexibility and responsiveness emerged as key themes, along with a 'can do' attitude. The infectious nature of this attitude attracts and inspires key stakeholders, including essential stakeholders in business and education.

Factors inhibiting the development of learning communities

Management

As noted above, while effective enabling management was a critical success factor, the case studies also identified particular styles of management as significant inhibitors. Traditional 'command and control' approaches to management are not conducive to the development processes required for building social partnerships and learning communities. Management difficulties included:

- ✧ partnership managers unaware of other stakeholder priorities; for example, the broader social and economic interests of local government versus the 'bottom line' interests of industry

- ✧ tensions between conflicting allegiances, for example, unemployed and disengaged youth versus local industry desire for work-ready job applicants
- ✧ potential conflict between local government representatives and business-sector representatives in relation to the wider social roles of the partnership
- ✧ limited ability among managers to enact principles of governance and cross-sectoral communication
- ✧ rigid industry, education and governance structures and processes.

Further inhibiting factors relating to management include concerns about schedules, timing and timeliness. Respondents reported on the difficulty, and sometimes absolute impossibility of matching tenders, proposals, submissions and programs from the field to mandated management schedules. Schedules were perceived as inflexible, unrealistic and unsympathetic to the needs of the community/industry. The absence of measurable outcomes was identified as a constraint, as was management by generalised committees with no genuine stake in the project.

Ownership

While stewardship was identified as a key success factor, 'ownership' was identified as a factor constraining the development of learning communities. However, this statement needs clarification. In this context, ownership refers to that located in too few individuals; overly possessive ownership; lack of community ownership and lack of involvement; and financial commitment from business stakeholders. The absence of key community stakeholder involvement was identified as an inhibitor to development, as was their divergence from the project aims and purposes. Weak support ('lip service') for the project and lack of trust between key stakeholders were also inhibiting factors.

Further inhibiting factors

Long-term dependence on government funding was cited as a significant difficulty, particularly in relation to the autonomous sustainability of developments. The project also identified poor understanding of educational design and processes as a key issue: it was apparent that, in some instances, even when supporters had a vision of what they wanted to achieve, they had little sense of the design, development and learning processes required to get there. Competing institutional demands with the potential to undercut the progress of the project were also a constant challenge.

Key insights

The case studies revealed key insights into the nature of learning communities and how they may be created and sustained. Key stakeholders' interests, which are often diverse (and sometimes divergent), require constant monitoring to ensure that cooperation between stakeholders is sustained. The potential for cultural clashes needs to be recognised and managed across sectors and 'tribal' lines. If possible, all stakeholders need to be involved from the beginning, so that strong links are built and maintained. However, stakeholder membership also needs to be reviewed, and new relationships nurtured as circumstances and projects change. The sustainability of the project needs to be established and planned from the beginning, along with strategies to encourage the development of stewardship. In some respects this developmental work calls for new forms of professional practice that involve working with new colleagues—from different 'tribes'. It means working in new ways and in different contexts where pathways are ill-defined.

The project demonstrated that, in relation to these case studies, stakeholders from educational institutions rarely adopted a proactive role. However, also highlighted was that effective educational strategy and curriculum/learning designs are necessary for the success of these projects. Such design and development processes cannot be left to senior administrators. Skilled educational practitioners with appropriate industry and community experience and understandings are indispensable.

Introduction

Background to the study

This study is framed within a context of change and change management whereby new demands are being placed upon adult and vocational education policy, providers and practices. There are now widespread arguments supporting lifelong and life-wide learning; that is, learning throughout the lifespan, from birth to death; but also learning across all aspects of life, from family and community settings to workplaces. The arguments about the need for continuous learning are related to concerns about change and perceived rifts in the social fabric.

Watson et al. (2003) articulate some of the key issues in their publication, *Fragmented futures*. Their analysis is only one of many that highlight a set of interrelated concerns:

- equity/inequity—perceptions of growing disparity between rich and poor
- environmental degradation and concerns for sustainability in diverse spheres of the environment, life, work and community
- diversity management, tolerance and racism
- globalisation.

Responses to such issues include arguments for the development of so-called triple bottom line evaluation and accountability policies and mechanisms, where social and environmental indicators are considered alongside the traditional financial or economic assessment of the 'bottom line'. This line of argument and political strategy is pushed further by those advocating the 'fourth pillar' which recognises and legitimises the vital place of culture in these processes (Hawkes 2001).

Within this context the question is whether vocational education and training (VET) and adult community education (ACE) policy and practices are contributing to the multiple problems noted above, or whether adult and vocational education are part of the solution. This research project is one of several examining the role of VET within the social fabric (Allison, Gorringe & Lacey 2004; Billett, Clemens & Seddon 2004; Stokes, Stacey & Lake 2004). It is related to other projects which indicate a growing awareness of VET's need to address issues of sustainability, not only for its own sake, but for industry, the community and the environment (Plane 2003; Anderson 2003; Kent 2003).

More specifically, this project set out to investigate four sites which were seen to have developed—or at least were in the process of developing—forms of local learning community/ies. The sites chosen as the basis for the case studies were suggested by earlier work completed by the Victorian Local Governance Association (Snelling 2003).

The governance association's report, *It takes a village to raise a child* (Snelling 2003) addressed the issue of the new role for education in the community. Changes to the nature of work, the prevalence of short-term employment contracts and the fluidity of markets have led to an urgent need for community acceptance of the lifelong learning agenda and for institutions and agencies to adapt to the priorities. Local government has a part to play in facilitating positive organisational and community responses to these changes. The new social and economic environment is reinforced by government policy that has increasingly devolved decision-making to local sites. Localities are

engaged in defining their own identities and developing local resources to capture niche economic opportunities and to build community capital to meet particular challenges (Rural and Regional Statistics National Centre 2005).

Conceived in such a context, education far exceeds the boundaries of the schoolyard or educational institution. Education becomes a mechanism for social change and can potentially influence and contribute to change through community institutions, industry and government at all levels. Education therefore has a key role to play in local initiatives that seek to build social and economic capital. Because of its vocational and employment focus, its flexibility and recognition of informal and work-based learning processes, VET in particular has a great deal to offer in these endeavours.

Snelling's (2003) report was based on a community consultation process. It promoted a way forward in developing economically prosperous and socially resourceful communities through the forging of partnerships. It cited a number of local initiatives that provided examples of social change and community development projects whose success had depended upon dynamic partnerships between education, local government, industry and community institutions. The significance of the achievements of these projects was the result of their partnership components. However, the evolution of the vision, the recognition of the opportunities, the processes adopted, the conflicts, tensions and resolutions have not been analysed or documented. Such was the task of this research.

Research questions and focus

Within this context the following research questions were framed.

- How have opportunities for partnerships been conceived and negotiated?
- How has ownership among stakeholder groups been established and sustained?
- How has the project/s maintained relevance as the pressures and drivers have changed?
- What has been the role of VET and how could it further enhance the project/s?
- What has been the role of the local government and how can it support new projects?
- What can these projects teach others seeking education and training partnerships for the realisation of social and economic goals?

Method

This research was qualitative in nature, based upon four descriptive case studies at sites suggested by the earlier work of the Victorian Local Government Association (Snelling 2003). Data for the case studies were gathered through on-site visits and face-to-face interviews with the key stakeholders involved. In all, approximately 45 interviews were conducted across the four sites. Drafts of the case studies and selected excerpts from interviews were returned to the informants for correction, clarification and approval prior to being included in the report. The project was conducted in accordance with the guidelines for ethical research developed by the Australian VET Research Association and endorsed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). The research was overseen by a reference group whose membership is listed in the online support document.

The report

This report provides an overview of the research and summarises the findings from the case studies. It addresses the research questions and explores issues of community capacity-building. In particular, it explores the implications of this research and the potential roles for adult and

vocational education stakeholders and local government players. It concludes with some discussion of policy implications and questions for further research.

The online support document provides an overview of the literature which informed the study. It also provides, in full, the four case studies which were the basis of the investigation.

Case study findings

As noted, the four case study sites were suggested by the Victorian Local Governance Association study. The association provided examples of projects at different stages of development, each with different community drivers, set in metropolitan and rural environments. Until now, none of these initiatives has been investigated from the point of view of partnerships, their contribution to the community, and the role of VET.

The four case sites are described very briefly below. In each case we have also summarised the key institutional players, the key factors for success, the inhibitors which constrained or limited the project and the key learning from this project. The more comprehensive case studies based on these sites are included in the online support document.

In a nutshell: Apprenticeships Plus

The predecessors to the Moreland, Yarra and Darebin councils formed a group training company, which became Apprenticeships Plus. This was in response to the large number of unemployed youths in the region and the reduced capacity of local employers to offer them employment and training. The company has grown considerably in the past 20 years and has been challenged by the local government partners to expand its role. It has changed its governance practices as the local governments have responded to the changing needs of their communities and increasing accountability and governance responsibilities.

Key participants

- three city councils: Moreland, Darebin and Yarra
- Board of Apprenticeships Plus
- Work and Training Ltd
- MAS National (Making Apprenticeships Simple)
- local communities
- state and federal governments
- local businesses
- schools.

Key success factors

The Apprenticeships Plus story is a success story. For over 20 years the company has operated as a not-for-profit organisation providing employment, education and training services to its constituent communities and beyond. In this case study we have focused particularly on the governance issues which provide a timely and relevant illustration of key themes being investigated in this study. However, we do not attempt to tell the entire Apprenticeships Plus story within this study.

Nevertheless, on the basis of this investigation we can highlight significant success factors, including the initial (and lasting) commitment of the industry and local government parties to the

central purpose of the partnership; that is, to create apprenticeships and traineeships for young people. We recognise the government (federal and state) policy commitment to financially supporting the project. We see the significance of the delegation of operational matters to fully professional management. The creation of productive and ongoing relationships with 'host' organisations in business and industry and some local governments has also been critical to the company's success. The establishment of new business partnerships such as those with MAS National and Work and Training Ltd has also been important. We also note effective collaboration between stakeholders at board level (particularly more recently) as a critical success factor. Finally, we identify the significance of local government taking a broader view of its governance and community responsibilities.

Inhibitors

While recognising the success factors, we also attempt to draw from the Governance Plus story factors which might be inhibiting the development of the broader learning community. In this context we identify perceptions that the company management was perhaps unaware or not fully appreciative of the broader social and economic interests of its local government partners. We identify potential conflict regarding the wider social role of the partnership, as opposed to a narrower focus on business profitability. We report perceptions of the company management's lack of response to requests for improved governance and communication at board level. In this study dependence on government funding was also identified as a potential constraint.

Key learnings

- ✧ Key stakeholder interests need to be addressed in order to maintain cooperation.
- ✧ Changes in the wider social and political environment can have an impact on the core business.
- ✧ Changing responsibilities for local government suggest the potential for a more proactive role in adult and vocational education.

In a nutshell: Melton Shire

The Melton Shire is seeking to establish an internationally competitive equine industry. Given its geographic location, its skill base and the interests of the community, the equine industry has the capacity to draw prosperity, education and employment to the region. Unlike other examples in this study, this initiative is at the formation stage of development, hence it can provide insights into the experience of partnership negotiation and project establishment.

Key participants

- ✧ Shire of Melton Economic Development Dept
- ✧ Melton Equine Industries Development Committee
- ✧ Melton Community Learning Board
- ✧ Bendigo Harness Racing Training Centre
- ✧ Victoria University
- ✧ Djerriwarrah Employment and Education Services.

Key success factors

In the Melton story the capacity of the project to identify and satisfy the immediate needs of industry and the community emerges as a key success factor. Ability in this area greatly facilitated industry commitment and involvement in the training program. We see the effective planning of a

cluster of interlocking projects strategically aligned to realise an expansive vision beyond the immediate needs. This is facilitated by the appointment of the right people with a passionate commitment to their tasks. These appointments include an experienced educator who understands the industry, as well as the principles of contextualised, interactive education. We note also that the project was managed as a pilot program with the flexibility necessary for such 'fuzzy' projects. This approach also ensured that procedures-driven institutions were distanced from exposure to risk. The Melton story also illustrates the stewardship role of the shire and other key participants and the respect demonstrated for all players and their institutional cultural orientations.

Inhibitors

Developmental inhibitors identified in the Melton story were more difficult to identify. However, significant constraints were imposed by industry, education and governance structures locked into rigid processes. Initially the project was also constrained by the stakeholders' poor understandings of the education processes required to achieve the desired outcomes.

Key learnings

- central role of industry-appropriate educators involved in drafting funding proposals and project planning
- importance of thorough industry and community research
- importance of involving all stakeholders from the beginning
- importance of industry ownership.

In a nutshell: City of Casey

The City of Casey engineered a set of public–private partnerships driven by the desire to address the problem of early school leavers and to diversify the skills profile of the area. The Information, Communication and Electronic (ICE) Program was established specifically to encourage young people to stay in education and seek careers in the information technology industry. Local information technology industries suffered an urgent skills shortage after the demise of public utilities' skills development programs, which impacted on the electronics industry. A set of projects involving partnerships between schools and industry, particularly local employer Motorola, emerged and faded over the last six years. This case study has lessons to teach about sustaining partnerships, particularly when the cultural gulf is substantial.

Key participants

- City of Casey, Economic Development and Community Development Departments
- Berwick Secondary College
- Cranbourne Christian College
- Hampton Park Secondary College
- Motorola (Australia)
- NRC Racing Team
- Precision Design Australasia.

Key success factors

The Casey project demonstrated the willingness of all parties to accommodate the processes and cultural idiosyncrasies of other partners. It highlighted management practices shielding others from involvement in activities they may consider time-wasting, irrelevant or contrary to their priorities.

Hence, understanding the needs of other players and responding to their high priorities, and managing the interfaces where partners interact with one another were critical to success. The project demonstrated the importance of passionate advocates able to bend the rules to support and facilitate the project. It also highlighted strategic planning for broad ownership to shift pilot projects into the mainstream; that is, the 'institutionalisation' of the project. The Casey story also illustrates how discussion of government values and policy can bring to the foreground issues which are latent or poorly articulated. Policy discussion helps industry and communities to express concerns. Synergies between policy, funding and industry and community needs create opportunities. This project also demonstrated the capacity to rise above the noise of competing demands.

Inhibitors

While the project demonstrated success factors, as in the other cases there were other factors which constrained or inhibited the desired outcomes. At Casey these factors included ownership located in too few individuals and management by generalised committees with no stake in the project. There were also multiple competing demands that disengaged key project players. The issue of timing, or mis-timing emerged as a key factor. Opportunities were lost and positive synergies failed to develop because schedules, funding cycles and timelines appeared insufficiently flexible and unsympathetic to industry and community needs.

Key learnings

- ✧ Cultural clashes need to be recognised and managed.
- ✧ Broad ownership and longevity need to be planned for from the beginning; stewardship needs to be strategised.
- ✧ Closer relationships are required between partners and funding bodies.

In a nutshell: Wodonga City Council

By identifying itself as 'learning city', the City of Wodonga initiated a project to increase community involvement in lifelong learning, including VET, and to attract government and private investment. It established a partnership with the Albury City Council and a number of business, eduction and community organisations. At the time of the case study the project was faced with the loss of government funding and the need to re-invent itself to ensure sustainability.

Key participants

- ✧ city councils, Wodonga and Albury
- ✧ Centre for Continuing Education (Albury-Wodonga)
- ✧ Victorian Government
- ✧ Members of the Learning Cities Consultative Council.

Key success factors

The key factor in this 'Tale of Two Learning Cities' was the commitment of local government to auspice and support the vision of Wodonga as a learning city. The vision of the project coordinator and local government leadership were fundamental to its development, as was policy and funding support from the Victorian Government. The ability of the project committee to attract key stakeholders in business and education was also critical to its success. This project also highlighted the importance of flexibility and creative thinking in developing new approaches to promoting adult and vocational education within the local communities. Finally, we note that the vision would have been pointless without an effective strategy plan.

Inhibitors

The 'downside to the Wodonga story was located in the relatively weak community 'ownership' of the project and its vision. Some informants argued there was a lack of accountability to community for implementation of the strategy plan. A lack of involvement in and financial commitment from large and small business was reported. The absence of involvement of key community stakeholders at the beginning of project (for example, the library service, neighbourhood houses, Wodonga Council Community Development Department) did not encourage success. The study also revealed some divergence of purpose and perhaps lack of trust amongst key stakeholders and the lack of project activities with measurable outcomes. While government funds enabled the project to be launched, longer-term dependence on state government funding was articulated as a constraint to continuing development.

Key learnings

- ✧ importance of building and maintaining strong links with key stakeholders
- ✧ need to attend to different interests of key stakeholders, especially Wodonga City Council
- ✧ importance of managing communication between partners
- ✧ need to develop a broad funding base/danger of over-dependence on one source of funds.

Building community capacity

In this section we discuss the implications of the study. In particular we discuss what might be done to build community capacity and to generate the sorts of learning communities which these projects demonstrate are feasible. Our research questions were concerned with issues of project creation and sustainability and the roles for VET and local government in these capacity-building processes. These questions are addressed.

This section is organised around five core themes which emerged from the data and represent the significant challenges for the various stakeholders involved—adult and community education (ACE) and VET practitioners; local government authorities; and industry, employer, and community representatives. These themes, or challenges, relate to:

- ✧ getting started: the 'drivers' for 'new social partnerships'
- ✧ enabling management: facilitating 'fuzzy' projects
- ✧ ensuring success and sustainability
- ✧ moving from ownership to stewardship
- ✧ envisioning new forms of practice.

Each challenge is discussed and illustrated with excerpts and/or vignettes from the data. We then discuss the implications of each challenge for the stakeholders, including ACE and VET practitioners and local government.

The concluding section identifies some policy implications of the study and suggests questions relevant to further research.

Getting started: The 'drivers' for 'new social partnerships'

The first few questions of our study concerned issues of project creation—how opportunities for partnerships had been conceived and negotiated and the roles stakeholders demonstrated in creating partnerships. These questions are addressed in this section.

As noted by Seddon and Billett (2003), the evolving concept of social partnerships is complex and multi-layered. In our sites the 'layers' included local government, local industry and employers, diverse community stakeholders and educational providers. The educational players were also diverse, including schools, ACE and VET providers and, on occasions, local government.

It is difficult to generalise across the four sites studied. Two of the sites, Albury-Wodonga and Inner Northern Melbourne might be characterised by what Seddon and Billett describe as 'enacted social partnerships'. They were conceived and initiated, for the most part, by local government authorities and/or individuals operating from local government. The challenge therefore became one of 'selling' the concept and engaging local stakeholders. In these two cases, none of the social partnerships was fundamentally 'grass roots' or 'ground up' initiatives. They were inspired and enacted from more corporate and/or policy-inspired platforms—albeit, in response to perceived community (and or industry) needs.

For the other two sites, Melton and City of Casey, the story was a little different. In these two cases industry and/or employer representatives played a more active role in establishing the projects.

However, in all four cases the concept of synergy was evident. There were possibilities for win-win outcomes and potential for the 'whole to become greater than the sum of its parts'. The role of local government in creating links, initiating and building relationships, and making connections to possible sources of funding was important in every case.

What was also evident was that in none of these cases did the VET sector institutions play the lead role in conceiving or initiating the project. In each case the education sector was 'recruited, or, as in the case of Apprenticeship Plus, was tailor-made by local government to meet the need.

As we considered the 'drivers' for these partnerships, several key themes emerged from the data, namely, the importance of:

- ✧ policy context (and related funding) which drew issues into prominence and created a climate of need to rally support
- ✧ local socioeconomic development needs which profiled skills shortages, unemployment and concern for regional sustainability
- ✧ entrepreneurial leaders who were passionate about the project and determined to overcome obstacles and make it happen.

Local government drivers

In each case the policy context was a key factor in inspiring and initiating the project. The policy legitimised concerns and the government funds made responses possible. It is likely that none of these four learning communities would have evolved had it not been for government policy and related grants or other resource allocations. For instance, the Wodonga Learning City initiative was directly funded by the state government, and the initiative of local governments in establishing a group training company probably would not have occurred, nor been sustained, had it not been for Commonwealth funding and policy relating to youth unemployment, labour market programs and group training.

Local socioeconomic development needs

Secondly, in each case, the projects were a response to identified *local* issues. We saw how each of the stakeholder groups, education providers, local government and business/industry reflected a concern for the locality—a sense that the issues (including the problems) needed to be addressed locally as much as possible with the people and resources in place. This is not to suggest that external resources were not welcomed. However, in each case, the focus was on local initiatives and the potential for prosperity to grow through the development of skills, knowledge, resources, networks and socio-commercial relationships rooted in the local community.

Hence local socioeconomic problems and skills shortages were dominant drivers for these projects. The issues included, but were not restricted to:

- ✧ skills shortages in particular local industries/sectors
- ✧ local high unemployment levels
- ✧ pressure for localised strategies for economic growth
- ✧ creation of local opportunities for youth
- ✧ correction of planning mistakes
- ✧ encouragement of community cohesion.

Both the City of Casey and the Shire of Melton case studies illustrate these issues. Both areas are beset by similar problems. They are both outer suburbs of Melbourne, in the east and west

respectively, that were not so long ago identified as rural rather than urban. Both however have been transformed. Affordable housing has attracted sizable urban populations heavily weighted towards the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Both councils are seeking to stimulate the local economy by supporting industry in the area and by developing local skills to meet the employment needs of the region. They have set about listening to local industry and have shaped their responses around the concerns expressed.

From the field: Developments east and west

Casey's economic development officer described his region as a 'skills monoculture' consisting mostly of trades-level employees. Many of the new generation, however, are not completing trades or academic qualifications and appear to be drifting towards low-paid service and retail employment. There are a number of information technology companies in the area who are all 'screaming' for skilled employees. The community is poorly placed with 'skills of the future', and information technology could provide employment and prosperity to the region. Casey's economic development officers were sent on a mission to find opportunities for information technology skill development and to source funding to initiate them.

Motorola was first to voice its concerns and to seek solutions within the local Casey community. Motorola has been unable to satisfy its need for information technology specialists. Along with other information technology companies, Motorola has been forced to import skills from overseas and to export work that could otherwise be conducted in Australia. In the late 1990s, under the leadership of John Perrin, one of the directors of Motorola Australia, the company set up a relationship with local schools to stimulate interest in information technology. The company opened its doors to the students at Berwick Secondary College and later worked with teachers to design and develop a course in radio technology. Motorola's staff also set up a program at Cranbourne Christian College where students learned to build computers. Theirs was a long-term investment with an incubation period of at least seven years before the students would graduate from university and become employable. Nonetheless, Motorola believed in the value of seeding interest in schools in the hope of harvesting a forest of experts in years to come.

In the west, the Shire of Melton is similarly concerned about the lack of diversity in its skills profile along with its high levels of unemployment. Statistically, the ratio of jobs to households is 0.48:1, with many households experiencing intergenerational unemployment. The school leaving age is low and the prospects for local employment in professional and semi-professional occupations are poor. However, the shire has abundant equine businesses. The Melton region accounts for 20% of Victoria's harness racing horses and 17% of Victoria's licensed harness racing trainers (Melton Equine Industry Development Project 2003). There are 242 trainers within a 30 km radius of Melton and 100 private harness training properties in Melton. The locality supports over 1000 horse properties, which include thoroughbred breeding and training, recreational riding, equestrian activities and specialist equine interest groups such as polocrosse.

However, growth in the equine industry has been limited by a lack of skilled labour, as well as a shortage of facilities for racing and events. Business owners have had to limit the size of their operations to fit the availability of skilled labour capable of handling and training horses and maintaining farm businesses. The industry had expressed its concerns over a period of time and welcomed the shire's invitation to form the Melton Equine Industry Development Committee. The outcome has been a business case, a very successful training program and plans for an exciting 'centre of excellence' that will bring a diverse population, a range of skill development opportunities, along with local jobs and prosperity to a region that has been categorised as disadvantaged.

Entrepreneurial people 'drivers'

A third theme emerging from the case studies was the significance of passionate individuals who made things happen. The significance of individuals providing leadership, thinking outside the square and acting strategically to engage others cannot be overstated. It is easy to view projects

such as those documented in this study as institutional in nature. Policies are often imposed from above. As a consequence, procedures and documents are created to frame or promote partnerships between organisations or institutions. However, while the policy and the partnerships may be framed in institutional terms, they need people on the ground, people committed to the vision, to make them work. In each of these cases there were individuals with some 'fire in the belly', individuals prepared to 'go the extra yard' and keep the project buoyant. There were those whose 'greatest contribution was raw enthusiasm'. Without these entrepreneurial individuals the policy would have remained words on a page rather than people in practice.

Every project in this study was supported by enthusiasts, particularly in its initiation stages. In Albury-Wodonga Learning City, it was Jim Saleeba and Councillor Crapp. In the City of Casey study it was the teachers at Berwick Secondary College, the Motorola employees who worked at Berwick and Cranbourne Christian College or the industry leaders from Motorola and Precision Design. These are the people who demonstrate how to turn a vision of the possible into something 'do-able'.

From the field: Passion and commitment in the City of Casey

Peter Cocciardi from Precision Design was the inaugural president of the Victorian Institute of Steel Detailers. He, along with other members of his industry, had found it impossible to fill vacancies within his business and had to import skills from Singapore, Taiwan and the Philippines. Technical and further education (TAFE) institutes and universities did not have the industrial expertise or competitive software to satisfy current skill needs. When the economic development officer from the local council approached Peter with the proposal of a partnership with a local school, he thought he had found the answer. But it was not a simple one. The resources needed to provide up-to-date training were prohibitively expensive and the expertise was not available in the schools. Undaunted, Peter set about activating his networks, both local and international. In time he had located four software companies prepared to donate software packages valued between $55 000 and $100 000 and operating licenses worth between $8000 and $30 000. He contacted local companies engaged in drawing and reading designs in the building trade. With the support of these companies, he could provide a rich variety of learning experiences for students in industry placements. The industry was keen, despite the health and safety and supervision hurdles in providing training placements in this industry. Peter was particularly elated by the donation of an electronic plate profile cutter which would be mounted in the training area of the school. And, at the end of the course, there was guaranteed employment. Peter had unlocked enormous wealth that the industry was willing to give. It was not just plant and equipment but volumes of good will and knowledge. Peter found retiring staff willing to share their knowledge with teachers and equip them to teach the program. All this had cost him long nights and weekends of unpaid work but the rewards for the industry and the graduates would be plentiful. It was not only Peter prepared to pay the price. The teacher from the school had put in hours of unpaid time. The project was to be supported by funds from the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). Steve Silestean from Hampton Park Secondary College worked up an excellent submission that was well researched and supported by other local schools. The project looked as if it could not fail. The budget was within target and the submission met every criterion—except for one understated priority. The school was not regional and this was to be a deciding factor for ANTA. Sadly, the submission failed, the school walked away compelled by other priorities. And, the opportunities dissolved.

The unfortunate consequence of such experiences is that it becomes increasingly difficult to re-kindle enthusiasm and gain the commitment necessary for such developmental work.

Enabling management: Facilitating 'fuzzy' projects

In a related theme, we were also struck by the importance of what Sanguinetti, Waterhouse and Maunders (2004) have termed 'enabling management'. Whenever innovation and new ways of

working are proposed, there are often multiple points of resistance. It is often easier for managers to find reasons or 'excuses' why something can not be done than find a way of making it happen. Where these projects were successful, they often provided telling examples of managers making decisions to enable and facilitate the developments desired—even though this meant stepping outside conventional ways of operating or managing. In other words, strategic management support was identified as a critical success factor.

In the literature review we have noted emerging research and theory which highlights the complexity and ambiguity of social practice. Such research suggests the difficulty and, in some ways, the folly of attempting to 'pin down' complex social variables and assume simple or singular cause-and-effect relationships. John Randles from Bendigo Harness Racing Training Centre expressed this frustration:

> Education administrators seem to want the outcome directly associated with the input and education doesn't work like that. Never has. Never will. And I think when we get administration being *educational* administration and not just administration; we might actually prove a point.

We find that the forms of professional practice associated with developing these 'new social partnerships', building 'learning communities' and developing social capital can be extremely complex, challenging and multi-faceted. The projects described in these case studies are typically 'fuzzy projects' (Verwey & Comninos 2002; Kenny 2002). They operate within the landscape of professional practice that Schon (1983) described as the 'swamp'. It is an exciting place full of opportunity and potential, but it is also characterised by risk, uncertainty, ambiguity, change and shifting circumstances. There is little 'hard high ground' to be found anywhere in these projects. As we sifted through the stories told by various participants and stakeholders, we began to appreciate the complexity of the contexts in which they were operating.

From the field: Beating a new path in Melton

'We prefer all programs to have predictable outcomes', said Troy Scoble, the economic development officer from the Shire of Melton. However, this project to train local unemployed young people to fill vacancies in the equine industry was far from predictable. Troy and his colleagues found themselves in alien territory managing an education project in a fragmented industry.

> We didn't have the expertise in this area and we were required to submit funding applications and to draft up outcomes before the project started.

Despite their best efforts to include all relevant stakeholders, significant hurdles interrupted the predicted flow of events. For example, first attempts to attract course participants drew only four enrolments. With only days to go before the course was scheduled to start, a new strategy had to emerge. Where were all the disengaged youth urgently seeking work and a route out of their malaise? It was not until professional youth workers were consulted that a new approach was designed that would communicate with the target market.

The initial training program outline was in the hands of the economic development officers and the Melton Equine Industry Development Committee. They put together topic outlines with the information they had, but it was clear to an educationist that the outline would not meet the needs of the industry or the learners.

> Initially the [communication part of the] course looked at OH&S, report and resume writing and first aid. No one in the equine industry was even interested in those because they didn't have horses in them. (John Wooding, Course Coordinator)

John redesigned the course to provide a highly contextualised, practical program intimately tailored to the needs of the industry. Other courses on offer were too specialised and directed towards potential jockeys or harness drivers. There was nothing available that combined horsemanship, animal husbandry and farm management. The redesigned curriculum was a patchwork of courses. The outcome however exceeded expectations.

> The industry was blown away with what they'd done … Till then they thought it was going to be a traditional course like what's been offered in the past … This is the first course that they would be confident to employ someone straight out of, knowing they were really able to work on their property. (Troy Scoble, Economic Development, Shire of Melton)

The successes were a result of the fancy footwork of all those involved. It meant constantly identifying the barriers and finding a way around them. It meant stepping aside from the accepted procedures and doing what needed to be done to make it work.

> These are difficult projects. They are a seven-day commitment and hard and dirty at times. (John Randles, Bendigo Harness Racing Training Centre)

Projects such as these are not for those who are locked into traditional ways of doing things:

> It was just a constant weekly and fortnightly challenge to manage the project. We'd have a meeting on Friday. The next Friday we'd be in an entirely different area than we thought we were going to be … Within my business case project, the budget didn't change. With this project, I reckon we had, over a 12-week project, 7 budget changes. (Troy Scoble)

Institutions are not resourced to manage fuzzy projects:

> The problem is that large institutional training organisations don't have entrepreneurial energy. They are burdened by bureaucratic regulations and institutional frameworks. Thinking is framed by the bureaucracy which does not allow training organisations to respond directly to the need … It is all about how they define their purpose. It is not rewarded for overspending on the budget. It doesn't matter if they have uncovered something that is really important which should be pursued. (Toni Anne Collins, project officer, business case)

For this reason, the Melton Shire set up a pilot at arms' length from the local VET institutions. The pilot allowed the freedom to demonstrate that the project was do-able and sustainable—the needs of the local industry and community could be met:

> A large part of what we are doing is to identify the risk and take it out for the other players and leave it behind. (John Randles)

Implications for stakeholders in negotiating and facilitating partnership opportunities

The wisdom from these case studies suggests advice to all major players:

- ✧ VET, local government, community and industry have the potential to assist one another in solving their related concerns. They all benefit from effective networks enabling the exchange of knowledge and skills, better integrated communities and a greater voice in local decision-making.
- ✧ Effective partnerships are facilitated by:
  - ♦ establishing forums across industries and sectors to meet and discuss opportunities and concerns
  - ♦ listening for synergies between industry and community groups
  - ♦ capturing stakeholders' concerns and turning them into opportunities by marrying them to key policy directions linked to funding sources
  - ♦ working with VET to break down barriers in bureaucracies and identity.

Success and sustainability

This section reports on the key themes which emerged relating to the success and sustainability of the projects. It addresses our research questions concerned with ownership, maintaining relevance and sustaining the projects. The themes were:

- ✧ recognising diversity in values and purposes

- ✧ managing the cross-sectoral interfaces
- ✧ nurturing relationships
- ✧ shifting from pilot project to mainstream programs—'institutionalisation'.

Recognising diversity in values and purposes

One of the key findings emerging from this study is the importance of recognising and valuing diverse indicators of success. This recognition and appreciation is based upon cross-cultural understandings. We are highlighting here that each institutional stakeholder has its own culture, understandings, values and priorities. Hence, while in general terms various stakeholders may agree with the espoused values of a learning society, city, or community, what this actually means to each of the stakeholders is determined by their own frames of reference. So what counts as success may be different for each stakeholder.

Even within the education sector, broadly defined, we note differences in values, culture and norms. While, schools, TAFE institutes, ACE providers, group training companies and universities (for instance) have certain things in common, they also reflect significant differences. Even within the schools sector there is a rich variety of opinion about the desired outcomes from schools. As one of our informants noted: 'Everyone argues (or has an opinion) about what they want from a school'.

Expectations of schools include academic outcomes and pathways to tertiary study, vocational and employment outcomes, social engagements and a suite of values addressing issues of morality, employability and citizenship. They are also increasingly expected to be self-governing and financially accountable for their cost-effectiveness.

To these diverse expectations we might add the differences in perception generated by viewing learning issues through the lens of local government (and possibly state and federal government) stakeholders. Here the issues are 'framed' by concerns about public accountability, requirements for openness and transparency in processes and procedures and, not least, by the political consequences of strategies adopted, implemented—or ignored. The theme of accountability is dominant.

Then we might also consider industry and employer groups and individuals. Their lens on learning and their values is different again. Industry and employer stakeholders are looking for a 'bottom line' return. They have obligations to shareholders, employees, customers and other stakeholders which shape their engagement with such issues. They may have an interest in their public image, or corporate identity and they are looking for innovation, an 'edge' which will give them some advantage in the competitive marketplace.

When we talk about the 'learning community', the list of potential stakeholders, contributors and engagements might also include libraries and other learning agencies and networks, such as churches, health care providers, and emergency services (the latter have been identified as significant sites of learning particularly for men in rural communities [Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2004]). We might include the University of the 3rd Age, the Mens' in Sheds movement, women's groups, environmental and Indigenous advocacy groups, and so the list could continue to expand. In the context of a 'learning community' each of these various constituencies will bring its perspective, its values, aspirations and preferred outcomes. Not all of these stakeholders were involved in the projects documented in this study. However, they are all potential players in the processes of developing a 'learning community'.

Our key point here is that any serious attempt to cultivate and sustain a learning community is likely to involve diverse stakeholders with different values, interests and perspectives. For such initiatives to be successful and sustainable, all values must be reflected and diverse outcomes must be legitimised.

Within our small sample of projects we saw how definitions of success varied—from having 'a full book of apprentices and providing for the needs of business and industry' to 'influencing the strategic thinking of decision makers' and 'maximising community engagement and involvement'. What counts as success within such complexity? Whose values become the driving values and how might the various possibilities and values be negotiated? In this sense we have begun to appreciate the work between and across the sectors, networks, institutions and boundaries as a form of cross-cultural practice.

From the field: Appreciating different values in the 'Apprenticeships Plus' story

The importance of acknowledging the different values, and hence needs of stakeholders is exemplified in the development of Apprenticeships Plus. As the organisation expanded its operations with the acquisition of joint-venture partners, all of the quantitative indicators looked very positive: revenue was high, the number of apprentices and trainees continued to increase and relationships with business and industry were strong.

However, the changing environment in which local government was operating in the late 1990s and early 2000s had led to a cultural shift. Local government concerns about 'roads, rates and rubbish' had expanded to embrace broader social needs within communities and an expectation of higher levels of community accountability. This change in values led to a move by the local council board members of Apprenticeships Plus to 're-assert ownership' of the company and demand that the organisation begin to deliver a social dividend, in addition to its 'core' results.

The council board members saw this as essential to the long-term sustainability of the organisation. As Darebin Council representative, Kevin Breen expressed it:

> Apprenticeships Plus provides a useful service in apprenticeships and traineeships and is now operating on a national basis—we now need to look at how to return something via a social investment policy, a social dividend back to the host communities.

He and his fellow council board members proposed using the operating surplus to establish a 'community foundation' which could support school-to-work transition, or to set up a labour hire company to provide continuity of employment for casual labour and supply labour back to the host councils and other organisations.

The chief executive officer, meanwhile, saw the councils' role basically as host employers and ensuring that 'appropriate' governance arrangements were in place. Anything outside this, he characterised as pursuing their own 'self-interest' and seeking to create a 'good impression' with their constituencies.

However, in Kevin Breen's view, the company could not continue to survive, or expect the support of the councils, unless it began to take a broader view of its role: 'To stay still is to drown—we need to keep moving'.

Implications for the stakeholders

Funding bodies demand quantitative measures of success in terms of numbers of apprentices and traineeships created in a given year. Assuming the numbers are right, this may be sufficient for some governance bodies. However, to ensure the ongoing commitment and support of key stakeholders in a complex social partnership, there needs to be a mutual understanding of each other's (sometimes changing) values.

In the case of Apprenticeships Plus, the management view as expressed by the chief executive officer did not appear to take sufficiently seriously the changes in organisational culture and priorities undergone by local government in recent years. He saw them as 'silent partners', who should be content to support organisational plans on a purely business basis. Instead the local government stakeholders emerged as change agents, espousing a new agenda for the organisation, based on their view of the organisation's social role. Clearly, the scene was set for a confrontation,

with the future sustainability of the partnership depending on the ability of management to embrace a wider vision for the organisation. As is discussed in the case study (see the online support document), some changes in personnel and business strategy have addressed this tension to some extent. However, it cannot be resolved entirely and its ongoing management is a continuing challenge for the stakeholders involved.

Project evaluation is ultimately tied to the values which stakeholders place upon a project and its outcomes. These case studies show how important it is for all stakeholders to come to an appreciation of the governing values held by others.

Managing the cross-sectoral interfaces

An appreciation of institutional cultures and their differences is an important factor in making partnerships work. However *managing* the interface between institutions is an evolving skill in most successful partnerships.

The process of managing the differing values and purposes was well illustrated in the Casey technology education project. In particular, Terry Trevena, the assistant principal at the Berwick Secondary College and the champion who opened the doorways for the Motorola radio telematics project, provided valuable insights on this issue.

From the field: Managing different values in Casey

Terry talked excitedly about the exchange between the 'real-life technicians and scientists' and the teachers, as they wrestled with learning topics from the perspective of their different disciplines. Here he is talking about radio waves:

> As soon as you mention waves, the engineer is thinking how does this best fit with the thing we are manufacturing and the teacher is thinking how can I best teach kids to understand what's happening … It is like if you were to get a chef, a buyer and a diner together. When I mention 'radish', the person who is dining thinks what it tastes like, the person who is buying thinks where to get the best radishes and the person who is cooking thinks how can I best prepare the radish so you've got these totally different perspectives.

Terry's understanding of the totally different perspectives led him to appreciate that industry and employers tick to a clock different from that of school teachers. His involvement with Motorola staff demonstrated that industry personnel are looking for a speedy decision and clear outcomes. He sensed the strain in their tolerance as his teachers explored the pedagogical values and human relations implications of each item on the agenda. On the other hand, teachers were mystified by the apparent lack of concern for process on the part of industrialist. From these early meetings Terry vowed to manage these points of intersection so that one did not violate the values of the other.

> Industry don't want to come and just talk. They want a result. So what we found was that when we wanted industry to come along we had very specific things we wanted done … With Motorola … we wanted their hands-on involvement with the technology. They could deal with that.

'Managing the interface' was a term that Terry coined in discussing the management of partnership projects. He came to understand that, when the parties came together, agendas and tasks had to be scrutinised so that industrialists were not engaged in conversation or activity they regarded as time-wasting. Both parties needed to feel that the authenticity of their world view was acknowledged. Terry became a master of identifying the points of interface and putting clear parameters around them. In this way industry participants could be insulated, for instance, from school processes which industry personnel found tedious, unproductive, distracting and frustrating. Terry advised that the people who manage the interface must be people who speak both languages.

Halvard Dalheim, from Casey City Council also observed the cultural divide in bringing together industry and educational representatives:

> John Perrin (from Motorola) originally thought you could go into a (school) meeting and sign off on something. Rather than agreeing with the suggestion to teach this subject next semester, the school would agree to set up a committee to consider whether teaching this subject is a good idea.

John Perrin spent six years on the Berwick Secondary College school council. He wrestled with the clash of cultures:

> I sat in on a few interviews for assistant principal … and it was a major cultural shock for me because we were looking for senior people to take up senior positions in a very big school at Berwick and the vast majority of people we interviewed talked to us all about procedure and almost nothing about outcome. When I do an interview in industry, the first and most important thing is about outcome and, if I am interested, I will ask about procedure.

Despite his understanding of the cultural conflict, John still has little tolerance for 'over-bureaucratic intrusion':

> I am guilty of putting up the shutters and moving on. I can get better reward for my time and invested effort elsewhere.

Entrepreneurial energy can be a casualty of bureaucratic supremacy. Those skilled in managing the interface know that all values need to be respected. Sometimes that means negotiating the territory:

> We were quite clear early in the piece where we had common ground … we agreed to put fences around where we won't go. (John describing discussion with Halvard)

Respect for different priorities emerged as a key imperative in each case. John Randles from the Bendigo Harness Racing Training Centre has managed many partnerships with VET, the community and the industry:

> Unless they [the stakeholders] feel they are respected and are gaining out of it both personally and as a community, they have no reason to stay, so we push very hard to make sure everyone is respected and gets ownership.

John Randles displays a genuine willingness to look through another's eyes, as do Terry Trevena and others. John Perrin noted that the self-sustaining nature of school cultures does not assist teachers to be receptive to the culture of industry.

The challenge for managers is to speak the language of the partners and to recognise the points of intersection. When the discussion moves to a focus on broader project goals, outcomes and 'performance indicators', the differences in perspectives can become critical. What is needed are practitioners who are able to work effectively across the different discourses. They have to shield others from their cultural eccentricities, but at the same time ensure that all groups get what they need at the interface and, if possible, learn from one another in the process. No wonder it is so hard!

Continuity factors

The sustainability of these social partnerships is affected by the perceptions of relevance carried by the stakeholders. However, we also note that relevance does not ensure sustainability. *Relevance is necessary, but not sufficient.*

The projects revealed several instances of worthwhile initiatives failing despite their acknowledged relevance and value for the stakeholders involved. For example, some aspects of the Casey technology education project could not be sustained once the key project champion or local expert was unavailable. Some opportunities rolled away out of reach while key stakeholders busied themselves with issues of the moment. In such cases, the weight of other factors outside the project overrode the essential success factors of the partnership, and new initiatives faltered or failed. Such factors included the culture, established policies, funding protocols, timelines and work practices of the institutions involved.

Experienced practitioners asserted that, once the initiation stage has been achieved, measures to secure the longevity of the project should be in force. John Perrin talked about the need for the 'institutionalisation' of programs. The best example of this is Apprenticeships Plus, with a record of over 20 years of service provision through multiple partnerships with industry stakeholders. By contrast, while still smarting from the succession of discontinued technology education projects, John Perrin concluded that in most instances there was no mechanism in schools to move projects from the pilot stage to a point where they were part of the ongoing offerings of the school. He discovered that schools often have very limited institutional memory, and when staff leave they take with them their individual expertise and knowledge base. Casey officers found the same dynamics operating in TAFE. Programs that were funded once were often not picked up by the institution, despite the acknowledgement of their relevance and success. Halvard Dalheim (Casey Council's Manager of Strategic Development) was determined to do something about it:

> We have learned over time how schools work. We have learned they are dependent upon individuals. We need to build alliances between schools working in the same curriculum area so we can establish network support and to orient new teachers into the area.

Finally, on success and sustainability we note that many of the players involved recognised that sustainability does not happen by accident. It requires work and the active engagement of industry and other key stakeholders. Lynne Makin, Chief Executive Officer of the Upper Murray Regional Library, felt that the partners needed to do more than attend meetings:

> Collaboration needs nurturing … there needs to be someone out working with people, coalition-building, building relationships.

In her view the participation of a wider range of business was critical to the project's success:

> If it's going to be sustainable, it has to be a partnership with business—that's where the money is going to be coming from—and start with one community group, then look at another partnership, for example, Uncle Ben's or the Library Service … you need a cross-section of the community, rather than being reliant on the education sector, then build on that … [if] business had been involved from day one … you would have got something that is a lot stronger, balanced and more focused.

Implications for the stakeholders

The messages from this experience indicate the need to:

- ✧ nurture relationships, consciously drawing in new players as the project unfolds and monitoring satisfaction levels to ensure everyone is getting what they need
- ✧ maintain the synergies, renegotiating the common ground and shifting the boundaries to achieve inclusiveness
- ✧ manage the interface in order to shield other players from those aspects that are not relevant to them and mediate the engagements when necessary
- ✧ guard the value of respect for all players so each can meet their internal priorities without interference or ridicule
- ✧ establish mechanisms for the 'institutionalisation' of successful programs following the pilot stage.

Moving from ownership to stewardship

The issue of 'ownership' emerged as a critical concern. How has ownership been developed and sustained? Despite the demonstrable value of these projects, we were forced to conclude that the answer to this question was 'not terribly well'. Indeed 'ownership' of the projects, their goals and their practices was problematic in three of the four cases, the notable exception being the Melton story.

The stories of these sites highlight the tensions Seddon and Billett (2003) discuss and the challenges of developing the necessary trust and reciprocity for effective social partnerships. The success of such projects relies, at least in part, upon individuals being willing to place themselves (and their institutional identities) in the hands of others. At some level they need to trust in the wisdom of others to protect their interests when setting directions and framing goals. They need to be willing to make fulsome contributions to directions they did not set. This is not easy, particularly when the partnerships are being formed across institutional and sectoral boundaries. The issues of 'buy in' and 'pay off' are complex and each stakeholder views these issues through his/her own lens.

This was well illustrated by the story of the technology education project at the City of Casey. One of the key proponents of the project explained that the science department at the college was never deeply involved in the project. In retrospect he saw this as a mistake in his leadership:

> Either I've got to sell the project better or it wasn't a good project from the start. Selling it means not getting people to agree with it but being willing to do something about it … The important step is to get people to realise they can contribute and get something out of it themselves.

While the Casey project offered outstanding examples of industry ownership and local government leadership, the school ownership was poor and the community ownership was almost entirely absent.

In a similar fashion we noted concerns expressed by community stakeholders in the Albury-Wodonga story. The initial omission of the municipal librarian from the planning/network committee, for instance, appeared to be a significant oversight, given the difficulty of establishing a strong communication base which could assist the sustainability of the project. It was reported that the project lacked a 'comprehensive community development framework'.

Golding's (2004) research on social networks and auditing suggests the importance of the linkages *and the gaps*. The findings of this study, albeit small-scale, suggest that the absence of even one or two critical stakeholders or stakeholder groups may be extremely important in both shaping the way a project is perceived and to its sustainability.

On the other hand, the case studies also show how significant gaps or omissions can be redressed along the way if there is open-mindedness and a preparedness to bring new players on board. It is, after all, impossible to know everything at the outset of such projects, and the quest to ensure the inclusion of all the requisite elements/stakeholders may actually inhibit taking necessary action. In these circumstances engagement which is 'better late than never' is a reasonable strategy.

Within this context the shift from 'ownership' to 'stewardship' was perceived as helpful. It was clear that the learning communities were more successful where there was engagement and commitment from the stakeholders. In this sense they 'owned' the project and were prepared to work towards its success. However, the concept of 'ownership' carries a sense of possession and often a desire for control that is difficult to reconcile with the spirit of the new social partnerships required within these projects.

The concept of stewardship on the other hand implies a sense of responsibility and commitment, as well as management and responsibility on behalf of another. There is a selflessness about the concept of stewardship; it is concerned with providing service and passing something on—to others, to the community, to the next generation. This more selfless and positive sense of stewardship was demonstrated by comments by several of the informants in this study:

> Facilitating ownership is about not alienating players- it's about project leaders presenting ambitious projects as do-able …

> From day one you have to build sustainability in. You have to let people make mistakes. Rather than moulding them I would let them mould me. You have to put in as a leader … but I'd say 'good, let's do it your way'…

Tensions around issues of ownership and stewardship were apparent in each case. In the Apprenticeships Plus group training story this theme was reflected where the 'bottom line' was in tension with the demands of the local government board members for improved governance and increased social accountability. Indeed, there were always identifiable tensions between the catalysts, visionaries and risk-takers who were filled with entrepreneurial and creative energies (on the one hand) and those who felt constrained by public processes of accountability, transparency and responsible governance (on the other).

From the field: Brand name versus the vision at Wodonga

From the outset, the questions of ownership and control were an issue for the Albury-Wodonga Learning Cities Project. Rather than creating a coalition of interests to champion the concept, Wodonga City Council became the de facto 'owner' of the project by defining itself up-front as a 'learning city'. This was reinforced by the inclusion of the project into the council strategic plan and the adoption of the logo 'Australia's First City of Learning', as displayed on the council's website.

Although the funding for the project was channelled through the Wodonga Community Education Centre, the council provided the organisational base for the project, and the coordinator became, in effect, a council employee. And, while it can be argued that the involvement of Wodonga Council in the project was crucial for its development, it could also be reasoned that the fact that ownership was not more broadly based also weakened the project in terms of long-term sustainability.

The question of ownership is highlighted by the unwillingness of Albury City Council to become involved in the project in anything more than in name. This is further underlined by Albury City Council's decision to adopt its own version of the 'learning city' concept, when it identified itself as a 'knowledge city' in its 2010 vision statement.

There was an attempt to broaden the base of the project by establishing a steering committee, followed by the Learning Cities Consultative Committee but, by their own admission, several committee members saw themselves more as representatives of their own organisations rather than as owner/partners in the project. As Australian Industry Group Regional Manager, Gerry Pels expressed it, AIG's motivation for joining the committee was 'to have a voice and be seen as community-conscious—to be good corporate citizens'.

Similarly, the initial lack of representation on the committee by key adult education organisations, such as the Regional Library Service and the Neighbourhood Houses, or by significant business interests, demonstrates the relatively narrow range of interests represented by the 'partners'. This was summed up by the chief executive officer of the Library Service Lynne Makin, who said:

> If it's to be sustainable it has to be a partnership with business and … community groups—you need a cross section of the community, rather than being reliant on the education sector.

The issue of ownership and control is perhaps best illustrated by the decision of Wodonga Council to relocate the coordinator from the council offices to the Continuing Education Centre and 'take over' control of the council's involvement in the project with a view to achieving some short-term outcomes. To quote Councillor Graeme Crapp, the only measure of success for the council in future would be the number of people involved in learning activities—'the only measure that governments understand'.

Yet, while the project can be characterised as the exercise of ownership and control by a single organisation, which may serve to render it less sustainable in the long-term, in another sense the 'ownership' of the learning city 'idea' has been more widely shared than might appear. According to Rodney Wangman, Chief Executive Officer of the Continuing Education Centre, the legacy of the project will live on:

> Thinking about how to create learning precincts and learning hubs and how best to utilise common community facilities—the fruits of these labours will probably not be seen for ten to fifteen years.

Similarly, for Patience Harrington, Director of Community Development at Wodonga City Council and a critic of the project's lack of a community development focus, the project had 'created an agenda which will remain in our city for a long time to come'.

Ultimately, who owns the learning city 'brand' may not be as important as the fact that the idea of the learning city appears to have become embedded in the life of Wodonga. This is perhaps a testimony to the stewardship of the project initiators, Jim Saleeba and Councillor Graeme Crapp. Without their dedication and nurturing, and their ability to engage others in their dream, the learning city concept would not have flourished in Victoria's northeast.

Implications for stakeholders

This vignette prompts us to propose that the essential features of sustainability include:

- ✧ the spread of ownership, or stewardship, across a broad community base
- ✧ the management of values that advocate stewardship over possessiveness
- ✧ a champion who drives the project and holds together the thread of the values, purpose and history of the project.

Envisioning new forms of practice

We believe the work of (at least some of) those involved in the creation of these projects represents new hybrid forms of professional practice, ways of working which recombine traditionally separate and discrete forms of work in fresh new ways. Such practice is not yet well understood, theorised or researched. With its strong community connections this practice is several steps removed from the traditional teaching practice of most VET professionals. Furthermore, with anticipated relationships with industry (and employment outcomes), such practice also challenges traditional ACE teachers. However, the new forms of practice required are not the exclusive province of the VET or ACE sectors. Local government, industry and community stakeholders also have vital roles to play.

This research has particularly shown the potential for local government involvement and is consistent with moves towards a 'linked up' or 'whole of government' approach (Wickert 2004; Australian Council for Adult Literacy 2004). It shows that there are hybrid learning spaces (Seddon, Billett & Clemans 2004) which may be cultivated and occupied by many players, including other government and non-government stakeholders.

There are permeable borders between these domains of professional practice, but boundary-crossers are still relatively rare. Nevertheless, these case studies provide some positive examples:

- ✧ local government taking a more strategic and holistic approach to economic development and employment
- ✧ local government setting up business incubators to stimulate and nurture new enterprises
- ✧ local governments setting up partnerships with one another
- ✧ local government involvement in local learning and education networks
- ✧ local government personnel involved in schools, setting up pilot programs
- ✧ teachers going into industry to learn
- ✧ industry personnel collaborating and teaching in schools
- ✧ industry providing specialist equipment to schools
- ✧ industry stakeholders, *at the local/community level*, involved in designing training programs (this is not a corporatist or 'top-down' approach)

- ✧ local government and industry assisting in the design of curriculum
- ✧ local government involved in the governance of training providers.

There is much still to be done, much still to be better understood. What is clear is the inadequacy of simplistic concepts of 'delivering' education and training services to create a learning community. Creating synergies calls for new forms of professional practice. The dominant VET metaphors of the 'package' and 'delivery' fail to reflect the complexity, richness and potential of the developmental work required and demonstrated by these prototype 'learning communities'.

When we think about the implications for the stakeholders in terms of conceiving and establishing such projects, we are conscious of the way the ground has shifted. Education has traditionally been about the three Rs of **R**eading, w**R**iting, and a**R**ithmetic. Local government has been concerned about its three Rs: **R**oads, **R**ates and **R**ubbish. For both of these social institutions the ground rules are now shifting, in some cases quite radically. Perhaps all of the stakeholders involved could be thinking about a new set of three Rs based on **R**elationships, **R**elevance and **R**esponsiveness.[1]

Schools are increasingly expected to produce vocational education outcomes, and some schools are actively seeking closer integration into the business community. The ACE sector is actively linked to local communities and marketing vocational courses. Traditional TAFE providers are being encouraged to be more entrepreneurial and business-focused. For local government the changes also mean new roles and responsibilities. Some councils are becoming actively involved in wider social and skills planning for economic development. They are seeking answers to the future of skills growth, population diversity, the ageing of the population and business development in their local region. For some local government officers the response is a grindingly slow learning experience that is inevitably full of frustration.

> We [at the council] are good at rates and rubbish because we have been doing it for a long time, but we are still learning this … 6 years ago we put the 'environment' into our mission statement and council has since put resources into dealing with the environment. Two years ago we put the word 'education' in as an outcome and I now have Kim and an Education Officer down at Doveton.

New challenges, expectations and responsibilities are emerging, including expectations for different forms of social and community capacity-building and governance. The terrain of practice is being redefined. The case studies revealed the need for practitioners to forge new identities to operate on, across and sometimes outside their traditional institutional boundaries. There are challenging issues of culture, communication and knowledge construction involved in this cross-sectoral, cross-institutional work. As one of our informants, who was a local government representative on a training provider's board of directors, noted:

> Ultimately, the practical implementation of a partnership takes a degree of maturity that is often not present in the relationship. This partnership … because of the lack of social and economic policy, because of the lack of agreement between the member councils ... is more frail, brittle, more exposed, [with] a potential for conflict. Once we have all those things in place, everyone has got a lot more certainty of where their boundaries are and where people have a degree of comfort or discomfort, and that will define the field of play.

Implications for VET

Summing up, in order for VET to be more effective in creating synergies we see the need for:

- ✧ reconceptualising VET as the 'tool' in others' hands
- ✧ providing leadership; that is, to be more proactive in building capacity for the 'new work' required
- ✧ appreciating the need for a 'demand' not supply-driven system

[1] Acknowledgement to Jim Hinton at Workplace Learning Initiatives Pty Ltd. for this phrasing.

- ✧ recognising that it's not just 'industry' (traditionally defined) which experiences needs or articulates 'demand'
- ✧ focusing more substantially on community, locality and regionality in VET policy
- ✧ recognising the legitimacy of work which does not look (or feel) like traditional VET practice
- ✧ recognising and appreciating alternative values, priorities and world views (which are not necessarily qualifications or training-driven).

Implications for local governance

- ✧ The potential exists for local government to involve other stakeholders in local governance.
- ✧ There is potential for local government to act as a catalyst, facilitator and network builder.
- ✧ The unique perspective of local government positions it to 'unlock' demand and to direct the attention of VET and ACE providers to local needs.

Policy issues and further questions

The national strategy planning document *Shaping our future* (ANTA 2004) poses the question: 'How can VET organisations play an even bigger part in building and sustaining the communities they serve?' This study goes some way to answering that question.

Barriers to VET participation

One of the barriers most often identified by our informants concerned the lack of flexibility. Flexibility is an elusive term and used to describe almost anything where service falls short of the expectations of the client. In this instance, local government and business representatives accused mainstream educational institutions (including schools) of an unwillingness to:

- commit resources and systems to community projects before they had demonstrated their commercial viability
- disrupt established practice and systems for a project that does not easily fit in
- move outside established job descriptions to develop new and innovative curriculum and ways of working
- view the world from the perspective of industry and other stakeholders.

While there were entrepreneurial individuals within the education system, VET practitioners and administrators themselves agreed that the education cohort, as a whole, was not innovative in entrepreneurial terms.

Individual VET institutions have written policy in relation to commitment and support for local communities. However, these case studies reveal VET as a passive and sometimes a reluctant player. Large educational institutions tend to be risk-averse and encumbered with procedures, hierarchies and defined domains of authority, 'even finding the right person to speak to is a huge task', said a local government informant. Despite their frustration they admit: 'it is too important not to keep going'. The hope lies in 'greater autonomy in schools [which] will make for greater adaptability'.

As TAFE colleges expand and amalgamate, greater autonomy at the local level may be a casualty. Interestingly, those most active in these particular partnership projects were private providers and neighbourhood houses. There were examples of partnerships between schools and neighbourhood houses sharing the VET in Schools offerings; local government and private providers initiating a pilot project, or, in the case of Apprenticeships Plus, a private provider established to respond to a particular local need. The Bendigo Harness Racing Training Centre was also set up, in part, to bypass the cumbersome structures the established TAFE system presented.

However, from the perspective of John Randles at Bendigo Harness Racing Training Centre, it is unfair to require TAFE institutions to provide the dynamic adaptability available from small private providers. It is instructive to consider the strengths of different providers. While TAFE institutes can enable a project to be institutionalised, less formal providers may demonstrate a capacity for flexibility and adaptability. There is potential for these strengths to be further developed so that each type of provider is recognised for its specialty function.

A barrier most often encountered was that of inappropriate management. Previous research has lauded the importance of 'enabling management' in ACE sector workplaces (Sanguinetti,

Waterhouse & Maunders 2004). 'Enabling' managers foster the practice of community capacity-building and invite opportunities to engage in the locality. Such managers have the skills and the systems to facilitate 'fuzzy' projects. Ambiguity, inconsistency, unanticipated change and uncertainty are to be expected, but at the same time the rewards of growth in community-based lifelong learning, in resourcing local industry and community groups, in enriched networks and creative energy are also usually abundant.

'Fuzzy' partnership projects will lead all stakeholders into new sites of work. Within every project in this study, success has depended upon individuals willing to enter unknown territory and work in unusual ways. If we are to see more innovative, community-responsive programs, VET practitioners and administrators need to build the skills for, and expectations of, working in new sites and in new ways. They need to welcome opportunities to traverse the permeable borders that separate enterprises, institutions, sectors and organisations.

The issues for policy-makers to address are those that allow greater community access by:

- ✧ assisting VET practitioners to realise their commitment to locality and the community
- ✧ developing and rewarding VET managers who demonstrate skills in 'enabling' innovation and managing 'fuzzy' projects
- ✧ creating greater flexibility that allows adaptations by systems to make room for untidy, less predictable projects and experimental initiatives
- ✧ developing skills and expectations which move beyond traditional job demarcations into new sites and ways of work.

Relationship with local government

This project also demonstrates the pivotal positioning of local government in exposing and profiling local industry and community needs. Local governments have diversified their interests and are now a powerful repository of networks, knowledge and vision for economic and community directions. VET would do well to fortify its links and share its knowledge and resources with local government. VET is usually well represented in the education committees auspiced by councils, but the sector would also benefit from closer links with the economic and community planning elements of local government.

Funding arrangements

The findings of this project have already emphasised the importance of government funding. The alignment of funding to particular aspirations has catalysed new thinking, new approaches and the realisation of opportunities. However, funding processes have also provided significant obstacles. The first of these is the timeframes within which decisions have been made. The inordinate length of time and the rigidities between submission and decision-making have destroyed the viability of some projects. Hampton Park Secondary College waited five-and-a-half months for a decision on their project. The Shire of Melton planned to commence their training program in February 2004 but was unable to do so until almost 12 months later, largely due to the late notification of the funding submission. Bendigo Harness Racing Training Centre is still awaiting the outcome of a proposal for training funding almost two years after its submission. Yet, ironically, deadlines for submissions, tenders and expressions of interest themselves can often be unrealistically short and non-negotiable.

These timeframes can be particularly destructive in partnership projects where aligning partners in a dynamic environment is slippery and momentary. For Peter Cocciardi in Casey, the moment had passed and he was no longer able to reignite the project once he had left his position as president of the Victorian Institute of Steel Detailers.

The timing of the notification is also a problem in some instances. Had the Hampton Park Secondary College submission been successful, the school would have been unable to establish a program, given the lead time the funding allowed. Schools need to make their planning decisions

early in Term IV in order to meet staffing requirements and to allow students to plan their study options.

The length of funded projects was also identified as a significant obstacle. In Halvard Dalheim's opinion: 'unless you have a three-year program you are just burning money'.

This study identified a number of programs that died as soon as the funding ceased. Thus substantial investments of government funding are seen not to produce sustained, institutionalised, or long-term programs or effects. There is a lack of durability in the project outcomes.

While it is unrealistic to expect that every program or innovation will produce durable outcomes, it is also evident that project timelines and funding cycles are sometimes unrealistically short. Longevity issues and strategies for institutionalisation need careful planning, and sometimes projects with a longer funding duration are required. In the context of whole-of-government and 'joined up' strategies for community capacity-building, there is a need for bipartisan approaches to funding principles and guidelines. Such bipartisan support might make longer-term innovations and trials more possible, including those that may run across electoral or government cycles. These case studies show how funded time is necessary to move a program from pilot stage to mainstream level. However, funding policies also need to incorporate a progression towards independence and self-sufficiency.

Policy-makers need to review funding arrangements with consideration given to:

- ✧ bipartisan negotiation and ratification of funding principles and guidelines
- ✧ timeframes which make space for the planning needs of stakeholders
- ✧ flexibility in the project duration
- ✧ allowance for strategies to shift the project to financial independence
- ✧ open submission schedules that allow applicants to put forward proposals as opportunities arise
- ✧ negotiated outcomes that value community responsiveness, innovation and flexible points of accountability.

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Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Creating synergies: Local government facilitating learning and development through partnerships—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au>. The document contains:

- Introduction
- Literature review
- Albury-Wodonga: A tale of two learning cities
- ICE in the city of Casey
- Horsing around in Melton
- Governance plus: Group training in inner Melbourne
- Research method
- References.

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